

Mandela: New Baas, Same As The Old Baas

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8 December 2013

The end of apartheid in South Africa was neither the first nor the last people's revolution to be betrayed by its own victorious leadership.

Perhaps the premier example was Russia's Bolshevik victory in 1917. Compare the party's policies after the October Revolution to its rhetoric before. Lenin's book "State and Revolution," written to appeal to the huge influx of workers into the party after the February Revolution, hailed the Paris Commune as a model revolutionary government. In almost anarchistic terms, Lenin wrote of paying state officials workmen's wages, and Trotsky promised his first act as Commissar of Foreign Affairs would be to proclaim world revolution and then shut up shop. The Bolsheviks promised land reform to the peasants and proclaimed "all power to the soviets" (workers' councils).

After the Bolshevik seizure of power, it was a different story. Lenin began to purge one party of the Left after another. He steadily transferred managerial authority in factories from workers' committees to strict "one-man management" and enthusiastically embraced Taylorism. The regime suppressed the Workers' Opposition and threw anarchists into the Gulag. It carried out forced requisitions of grain and livestock, forcing collectivization in violation of traditional peasant tenure rights in the mir (or open-field system).

From 1989 on, the former Soviet bloc saw a series of "color revolutions" in which the people's gains on the streets were immediately given away to the IMF and World Bank by the "revolutionary leaders" newly settled into the seats of power. And meanwhile, the same thing happened in South Africa.

The forces of global monopoly capital have shown they will not hesitate to resort to direct colonial rule, dictatorship, and state terror that inflicts megadeaths on innocent people, when they have no other alternative. But it's their last resort. They far prefer — because it is far less messy — to rule indirectly through local elites, under the guise of neoliberal spectator democracy. They prefer to pacify popular majorities through the illusion of periodic elections that decide nothing, while the real decisions are dictated behind the scenes by economic elites.

In the late 1980s, faced with the prospect of a bloodbath in South Africa, the forces of global monopoly capital looked for a peaceful way out. And perceiving they might very well actually lose in the coming conflagration, the more realistic members of the apartheid regime were willing to talk.

Starting in the 1980s, according to John Pilger (“Mandela’s greatness may be assured, but not his legacy,” July 11) the white leadership had already started to try to split the black resistance between “radicals” (United Democratic Front leaders in the townships) and “moderates” they could do business with (Mandela, Mbeki and Tambo), and to coopt selected black leaders into the economic ruling class. Both’s government used small business loans to create a black bourgeoisie who owned businesses outside the homelands, and encouraged the rise of newly enriched cronies in the ANC leadership who lived in “golf and country estates.”

When the Afrikaner realists realized a transfer of power was inevitable, they held talks at Mells Park House in England, a mansion owned by the Consolidated Gold Fields corporation. There Mandela, spirited away from prison, met with selected National Party leaders and with representatives of the leading white corporations that had extracted wealth from the black South African majority for decades.

One outcome was Mandela’s release from prison in 1990, and public talks that led to majority rule in 1994. The other was Mandela’s abandonment of what had been the ANC’s official economic agenda, the Reconstruction and Development Programme. The most important part of the RDP was its promise to redress the historic wrongs of land and mineral resource appropriation by white settlers, forced resettlement of the black population, and the historic legacy of entire industries built on slave labor and virtual slave labor. All talk of land reform or reallocating mineral rights was dropped.

The same corporate interests retained control of the South African economy — but with newly rich members of the ANC leadership buying in and new black faces on the boards of directors. This became clear with last year’s massacre of 34 workers at the Marikana platinum mine (striking to protest corruption in the National Union of Miners, part of the once-radical COSATU labor federation which had been coopted into the ANC ruling elite as part of its devil’s bargain with white capital). Former NUM president Cyril Ramaphosa sat on the board of the London-based mining company that owned Marikana. The Marikana massacre came shortly after a massacre at the Aurora gold mine, owned by Nelson Mandela’s grandson.

The state, in its essence, is a tool for exploitation by an economic ruling class. You’ll never end exploitation by putting “revolutionaries” in control of the state. You’ll just create a new ruling class.

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Retrieved on 2 February 2024 from c4ss.org/content/22891.

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